

# Fort Davis

## National Historic Site

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



**Curriculum Materials Grades 9-12   Student Activity: Traveling a “superhighway” of the 1800s**

**LESSON:** Traveling a "superhighway" of the 1800s – The San Antonio-El Paso Road to California

**Summary:**

Using primary sources, students will evaluate the role that geography played in the development and sustainability of forts along the San Antonio-El Paso Road—in particular focusing on the location of Fort Davis. This road was a portion of the southern route to California. After the arrival of the railroad, the significance of the (dirt) road decreased substantially.

**Guiding Question:** How did geographical features influence the experience of people traveling in West Texas?

**Lesson Objectives:** Students will—

- Understand how geographic features influence strategic military decisions.
- Use higher level thinking skills to understand the layout/plan of a typical western military post.

**Materials Needed:** Copies of two handouts (below) and map on last page

**Procedure:**

1. Students will answer the questions below in their notebooks or on paper to turn in. Ideally, students will share their answers with a partner, a small group, or the class.

- Thinking about where you live, are there any geographical features that influence how or where things are built?
- What are everyday services you expect the government to provide?
- Why/where are new cities created?

2. Pass out “Table of Distances- El Paso Road,” excerpts from the journal of Harriet Bunyard, and map of Texas with both routes delineated. Working with a partner, students complete the accompanying assignment (below).

***KEY:*** Optimally for the 1st question, students discuss things like landforms, rivers, and soil, etc. For the 2nd question, students think about things like roads/highways, availability of wood, grass for forage, and running water, etc. Finally, students talk about changes or discoveries that make a location optimal for a city, and consider transportation in general—then and now.

Assessments: Answers to the questions may be graded for completeness and accuracy of information.

National Social Studies Standards:

*III. Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of people, places, and environments.*

*V. Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of interactions among individuals, groups, and institutions.*

*VI. Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of how people create and change structures of power, authority, and governance.*

*VII. Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of how people organize for the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services.*

## *Key*

- 1. Both of the documents are primary sources but they are very different. What are some of the differences between the two documents? Which of the documents do you feel gives you more information, and why?**

Personalized versus hard data, feelings and emotion versus facts. Answers will vary.

- 2. Both the table of distances and the writings of Harriet Bunyard mention natural resources. What is mentioned and why?**

Especially water (for people and animals), wood (for cook fires or repair broken wagons), and grass (for the animals pulling wagons). Sources of food, as well, such as deer or rabbit to eat. These are all items that travelers on the San-Antonio El Paso Road needed for day-to-day survival. More and more pioneers meant greater impact, and some pioneer campgrounds became polluted, especially near water sources. Drier lands in the desert meant scarcer natural resources.

- 3. How long was the El Paso Road? Harriet's wagon train didn't arrive in El Paso/Franklin until July 19—imagine a trip from Dallas to El Paso today, by comparison.**

San Antonio to El Paso = 654.27 mi. Answers will vary when students compare traveling today.

- 4. Looking at the names of the various places, why do you think stops were placed where they were? Explain your answer.**

Because they were located near water

- 5. What else do the names imply about the area and who resided there?**

Many of the places had Hispanic names. This is significant because it indicated that they either still lived there, or had lived there earlier

- 6. According to Harriet Bunyard, why are the houses abandoned?** Indian raids

- 7. What do you think Harriet Bunyard's perspective of Indians, African Americans and Mexican's was? Why is this relevant?** Answers will vary

- 8. Explain how the railroads changed travel across the West.** Broad answers are good.

**Constructed Response:** Answers will vary.

